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AUTHOR Dollahite, David C.; Marks, Loren D.; Olson, Michael M.
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ABSTRACT

There has been relatively little social science research on the influence of religious beliefs and practices on fathering. This study examined narrative accounts obtained through in-depth interviews from 16 Mormon fathers of children with special needs in the context of Mormon religious belief and practice, research on stress and special needs families, and ideas from the generative fathering perspective. The special needs of the children ranged from serious physical disabilities and intellectual and emotional limitations to life-threatening chronic illness. Atheoretical coding of the narratives revealed six themes. The first three, not explicitly religious in nature, were: (1) choosing to care; (2) dealing with today's challenges; and (3) building love through play. The second three themes were explicitly religious: (4) having faith in God's purposes; (5) giving priesthood blessings; and (6) accepting help from the church. The fathers in this sample provided a clear contrast to the prevalent image of special needs fathers as being beset by despair and likely to abandon their families. They seemed to father in a way consistent with the generative perspective, focusing on their child's, rather than their own, needs. Religion was an important resource for them, and influenced their coping, perspective of their experience, their parenting, and how they told their story. (Contains 73 references.) (KB)

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FAITHFUL FATHERING IN TRYING TIMES: RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF LATTER-DAY SAINT FATHERS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

David C. Dollahite, Loren D. Marks, Michael M. Olson
Department of Family Sciences
Brigham Young University

Revision of a paper presented at a symposium titled:
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Please send correspondence regarding this paper to:
David C. Dollahite, PhD
Associate Professor of Family Sciences &
Adjunct Assoc. Prof. of Religious Education
Brigham Young University
Provo, UT 84602
dave_dollahite@byu.edu

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Abstract: *This paper presents the findings from an exploration of religious beliefs from a collection of narrative accounts collected from 16 Latter-day Saint (LDS or Mormon) fathers with children with special needs. Six themes were created to organize the narratives as a result of coding. The first three are not explicitly religious in nature: (1) choosing to care, (2) dealing with today's challenges, and (3) building love through play. The second three themes were explicitly religious: (4) having faith in God's purposes, (5) giving priesthood blessings, and (6) accepting help from the church. These themes are connected to the literature on special needs children and related to the conceptual ethic of generative fathering (Dollahite, Hawkins, & Brotherson, 1997).*

FAITHFUL FATHERING IN TRYING TIMES: RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF LATTER-DAY SAINT FATHERS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Introduction

While there has been no shortage of scholarly work on fathers and fathering in recent years, relatively little social science research has been done investigating the influence of religious beliefs and practices on fathering. Indeed, religion has rarely been included as a variable of interest in studies of fathering (Marciano, 1991). Given the abiding importance of religious belief and practice in American life, it is surprising that scant scholarship has been done to ascertain whether and which religious beliefs and practices can be beneficial in helping parents raise their children.

This paper presents the findings from an exploration of religious beliefs and practices from a collection of narrative accounts from 16 Latter-day Saint (Mormon) fathers of children with special needs. We begin with a brief discussion on why we believe an emphasis on faith and fathering is timely and important. We then provide brief reviews of the literature on faith and fathering and special needs children[1]. Then we present ideas from the conceptual ethic of generative fathering (Dollahite, Hawkins, & Brotherson, 1997) which serves as a conceptual framework for the study. We then present the narrative accounts and discuss them in the context of Latter-day Saint religious belief and practice, findings from research on stress and special needs families, and ideas from the generative fathering perspective.

Why Focus on Faith and Fathering?

There are some social and cultural forces which discourage father involvement and relatively few positive cultural resources available to most men that assist them in their efforts to meet the needs of their children (Blankenhorn, 1995; Dienhart & Daly, 1997). The "negative" or "deficit" approaches focus on men's failings or try to force or "guilt" fathers into involvement. These include some strands of feminism, laws and policies designed to coerce paternal involvement or responsibility (e.g., paternity establishment, wage garnishment, court orders, etc.), well-meaning conservative social commentators who correctly emphasize the importance of fathers but who also believe that men will only assume paternal responsibility if coerced to by powerful cultural and legal forces (e.g., Blankenhorn, 1995), and the media, which usually depicts men and fathers as either absent, uninvolved, abusive, irrelevant, bumbling, or hopelessly flawed.[2] For some men, in some circumstances, these types of social and cultural forces may be needed. But we question whether the vast majority of fathers need, relate to, or appreciate the assumptions underlying these efforts.

There are also some social and cultural factors that explicitly or implicitly encourage father involvement and/or assist fathers with various degrees of success. These more positive efforts include mental health professionals, the Men's Movement,

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[1]The preferred term is "child(ren) with special needs" rather than "special needs child(ren)," but we frequently use the latter term when it flows better grammatically.

[2]One author summed up recent media portrayals of fathers in her piece in The Family Therapy Networker titled "Father Knows Squat."

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men's support groups, and employment policies (e.g., flex-time, paternal leave, Daddy Tracks), and churches. These influences are more likely to be helpful to the majority of fathers.

However, when one considers the actual influence of these cultural influences on fathering, they come up short. The deficit efforts cannot encourage long-term committed fathering from a position of shame and blame. The positive efforts are more helpful but may not be able to encourage and support a wide variety of fathers across the lifespan of their child. Religion seems to be one of the most powerful, helpful, and likely to be sustained forces for encouraging men to be fully and meaningfully involved in children's lives, especially in circumstances involving challenges or stress (Pargament, 1997). Recently, religious groups such as the Promise Keepers (Evangelical Protestant), St. Joseph's Covenant Keepers (Catholic) have begun working with men on issues of faith and fathering. The Million Man March for African-American men had a decidedly religious element as well. In addition to the national movements which have received media attention, many religious institutions work to facilitate father involvement through religiously-based moral persuasion, providing personal examples and community support efforts to discover and explore the religious beliefs and practices of fathers that lead to positive father and child outcomes seem important for many reasons, not the least of which is that religious faith may be a great force for encouraging committed, involved, responsible, and caring fathering in a culture that has many other powerful forces pulling fathers away from their children (Hawkins, Dollahite, & Rhoades, 1993).

Critical Review of the Literature on the Religion-Fathering Connection

Scholarship that has treated fathering and faith can be loosely categorized into three genres: (a) theological discussion and pastoral counsel primarily found in religious journals, (b) psychological and philosophical critiques, and (c) quantitative research in family studies which examines intergenerational transmission of religiosity.

Theological and pastoral work. A computer search on religion and fathering found hundreds of articles in religious magazines and journals which approach fathering from a theological and pastoral perspective (e.g., Falwell, 1987; Heinrichs, 1982; McCoy, 1986; Stolt, 1994). Christian theological discussions typically center around God's "divine fatherhood" and the relationship of this doctrine to earthly paternity. Pastoral articles relating to fathering typically include admonition encouraging fathers to incorporate various facets of religious beliefs and ethics into their father-child relationships.

Psychological and philosophical critiques. Psychological and philosophical explorations of the influence of religion on fathering that are either neutral or positive are somewhat sparse (Abramovitch, 1997; Kass, 1994; Miller, 1983; Vergote, 1980). Critiques of religious fathering are more abundant (e.g., Eilberg-Schwartz, 1995; Foster, 1994; Hook & Kimel, 1995, Schwartz-Salant, 1987). Freudian and subsequent pyschodynamic thought has impugned religion as "an obsessional neurosis" which spawns the "oppressive religious father" (Vergote, 1980) and is harmful to mental health. This view is highly problematic in light of Larsen, Matthews and their colleagues' (1993a, 1993b, 1995, 1997) four volume review of nearly 400 empirical studies on religion and health, which shows religious faith to be either harmless to or beneficial to physical, mental, and relational health.

Another source of criticism of religious fathering is found in the feminist literature's deep concerns that religious beliefs and practices which encourage fathers to believe they should have authority over other family members may lead to inequity, oppression, or abuse (Jantzen, 1995; Lee, 1995; Pannenberg, 1993; Soskice, 1992).[3]

Family studies. In family studies, both theory and quantitative research on the influence of faith on fathering is quite limited and qualitative research on the topic is nearly non-existent. The past fifteen years demonstrate increased interest in the intergenerational transmission of paternal religiosity but there seems to be little research which goes beyond the quantitative relationship between father religiosity and child religiosity and values (e.g., Clark, Worthington, & Danser, 1988; Giesbrecht, 1995; Petrillo & Smith, 1982). It is known that fathers' religiosity influences adolescents' religiosity, but not much is known about how or why religious beliefs and practices influence fathers' conduct. Marciano (1991) stated that the research on the religion-fathering connection was scant and in her review of that literature concluded:

> The impact of religion on fatherhood is one that needs closely detailed, including qualitative, study, to determine whether and how religion can enhance that role for the father, and for his children (p. 159).

Previous Research on Fathering and Children with Special Needs

There is a relatively small but growing amount of scholarship on fathers' experiences with special needs children (Frey, Fewell, & Vadasy, 1989; Fewell & Vadasy, 1986; Greenfeld, 1972; Hannam, 1975; Hornby, 1994, 1992; Lamb & Meyer, 1991; May, 1996; Turbiville, 1994; Turnbull, 1985). Lamb & Meyer (1991) conclude that the studies to date are limited in a variety of ways including an over-reliance on observations of fathers, research based on clinical impressions, maternal reports of paternal reactions, and focus on fathers' reaction to diagnosis rather than ongoing adaptation. Scholars in the special needs area now acknowledge that, until fairly recently, families with special needs children were perceived, studied, and treated as if they were "distressed, burdened by sadness and stigma" (Bennett, et al., 1995). Evidence suggests that while about one-third of families with special needs children may fit this generalization, the majority of such families, in spite of and because of these challenges, adapt, grow, and come to feel gratitude for the privilege or "blessing" it is to parent a "special child." In addition to these findings, there has been little research on the father's role in the development of special needs children (Beail & McGuire, 1982); fathers who are involved in the lives of their children with special needs when they are infants tend to remain active in their children's lives (Parke, Power,

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[3]Of course, personal and familial dysfunction are sometimes associated with certain religious beliefs and some religious men do mistreat their wives or children while believing their religion justifies it. However, many religious beliefs stress the importance of sacrifice and service for others, kindness, gentleness, and humility. And, of course, much is done in God's name that neither God nor most who love and serve God would condone. All religions give parents authority over children or at least require of children that they honor parents. Evangelical Christian, Orthodox Jewish, and Latter-day Saint beliefs and practices give fathers a leadership role in the family, but also strongly emphasize commitment, obligations, and benevolence in family relations.

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Tinsley, & Hymel, 1980); and numerous studies have shown that experiences between mothers and fathers with children with special needs are different (Bailey, Blasco, & Simeonsson, 1992; Beckman, 1991; Frey, Fewell, & Vadasy, 1989; Goldberg, Marcovich, Macgregor, & Lojkasek, 1986).

Scholars have called for research to understand the needs and patterns of fathers in accessing support resources (Bristol & Gallagher, 1986; Lamb & Meyer, 1991) and to study factors relating to successful adaptation by fathers of special needs children (Bristol & Gallagher, 1986, p.95). There has also been a call to study fathers of special needs children from a generative, positive perspective rather than from a deficit model which is extant in studies of fathers in general and fathers of children with special needs in particular (Brotherson & Dollahite, 1997). This study addresses these issues.

There is a small literature on religion and families with special needs children (e.g., Bennett, Deluca, & Allen, 1995; Rutledge, Levin, Larson, & Lyons, 1995; Schmitt, 1978; Weisner, Beizer, & Stoltz, 1991). Typically, religious beliefs and supportive religious communities are seen as coping resources for religious families in both the initial acceptance of as well as in the ongoing coping with the challenges of raising a special needs child. We found no research which focused specifically on religious influences on fathering in families with special needs children. This study begins to fill this gap.

The Conceptual Ethic of Generative Fathering and Faithful Fathering

This section suggests some connections between the conceptual ethic of fathering as generative work proposed by Dollahite, Hawkins, and Brotherson (1997) and the concept "faithful fathering." After a brief description of the framework, some connections will be made with religious belief and practice.

The conceptual ethic of fathering as generative work draws from the developmental conceptual work of Erik Erikson (1950, 1982) and John Snarey (1993). The conceptual ethic was presented as an example of a non-deficit perspective of fathering rooted in a proposed ethical obligation for fathers to meet the needs of the next generation that fathers experience internally and from familial and religious connections. The generative framework is based on the idea that challenges of the human context create needs in the next generation that fathers have the ethical responsibility and capability to work to meet, and that fathers and children both benefit and grow from this work.

A generative conceptual ethic. The generative framework was presented not as a model of how things are in the "real world" but rather as a "conceptual ethic." A conceptual ethic is a framework that is intended not primarily to model or describe reality but rather to suggest what is possible and desirable (Dollahite, et al., 1997).

Needs of the next generation. Generative fathering is defined as "fathering which meets the needs of children by working to create and maintain a developing ethical relationship with them" (Dollahite, et al., 1997, p. 18). Therefore, the generative ethic is grounded in meeting children's needs, rather than in other frameworks of fatherhood which are more about addressing issues of adult gender equity, meeting societal role expectations, or satisfying adult expressive individualism.

Beyond deficit perspectives. Generative fathering moves beyond what Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) called the "deficit paradigm" of fathers and the "role-inadequacy

perspective" of fathers which emphasize "fathers' lack of adaptation to sociohistorical change, their lack of involvement in caring for children, and their lack of interest in changing the status quo" (p. 15). The generative framework is "capabilities-oriented," that is it assumes that most men have both the abilities and the desire to meet their children's needs.

Generative work. The conceptual ethic of generative fathering conceptualizes fathering as generative *work*, rather than as a social role embedded in a changing sociohistorical context. *Fatherwork* is a term Dollahite et al. (1997) used to describe the conduct of generative fathering (but the term is also used as a general term to refer to fathering). The conceptual ethic suggests seven areas of fatherwork that fathers should be involved in: ethical work, stewardship work, development work, recreation work, spiritual work, relational work, and mentoring work.

1. Ethical work. Ethical work consists of the father's ability and responsibility to *commit* (to pledge to ensure the child's well-being) and to *continue* (to be an enduring presence in the child's life).

2. Stewardship work. Stewardship work consists of the father's ability and responsibility to *consecrate* (to dedicate material resources to the child) and to *create* (to provide possibilities for the child to achieve).

3. Development work. Development work consists of the father's ability and responsibility to *care* (to respond to their child's needs and wants) and to *change* (to adapt in response to their child's needs).

4. Recreation work. Recreation work consists of the father's ability and responsibility to *cooperate* (to relax and play together on the child's level) and to *challenge* (to extend the child's skills and coping abilities).

5. Spiritual work. Spiritual work consists of the father's ability and responsibility to *confirm* (to affirm his belief and confidence in the child) and to *counsel* (to guide, teach, advise, and inspire the child).

6. Relational work. Relational work consists of the father's ability and responsibility to *commune* (to share love, thoughts, and feelings with their child) and to *comfort* (to express empathy and understanding with the child).

7. Mentoring work. Mentoring work consists of the fathers ability and responsibility to *consult* (to impart ideas and stories when asked) and to *contribute* (sustain and support generative work of one's children).

The generative ethic and faithful fathering. Faithful fathering refers both to fathering that is faithful to children and fathering that is enlivened by religious belief. The term "faithful fathering" captures what the generative ethic calls for since the term faithful connotes a committed, involved, responsible, caring, loving, responsive, father. Indeed, the term faithful is used explicitly in the generative framework to describe the desired result of spiritual work, namely faithful fathers (Dollahite, 1997). In general, the conceptual ethic of fathering as generative work seems consistent with religious emphases on caring for the dependent and needy, working to serve others, meeting obligations toward others, and as an ethical ideal toward which to strive. Spiritual work is, perhaps more than the other seven types of generative work, consistent with religious emphasis on spiritual matters and providing meaning and guidance. Spiritual work does not necessarily imply religious belief or practice; however, religious beliefs and practices can be helpful in facilitating generative spiritual work (Dollahite, et al.,

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1998). Ethical work, with emphasis on commitment is consonant with the idea of covenant in religion. Stewardship work stresses dedication to the child's physical well being which is consonant with religious emphasis on caring for other's material needs. Development work's emphasis on attention to growth through responsive care and adaptation seems similar to religious injunctions to care and change for others. Relational work, which includes "communing" and "comforting" is reminiscent of religious teachings to love and succor others, especially those who are alone or in pain. Mentoring work, with its emphasis on passing on wisdom and supporting others in their work, is similar to pastoral teachings to bless and assist others in their burdens. Recreation work's emphasis on playful cooperation in the midst of stress and challenges is consonant with religious teachings which hold out the possibility of peace and joy even while surrounded by difficulties and pressures.

Methods

Sample

The sample consisted of 16 married, middle-SES fathers of special needs children from central Utah. Most were involved in a support program for such families. Types of special needs of children in our sample ranged from serious physical disabilities and intellectual and emotional limitations to life-threatening chronic illness. Fathers were generally between 20-30 years old (mean 26) with between two and four children. The majority of the special needs children were under age 3, but many of the families involved had older special needs children as well. The sample was mainly Caucasian with one African-American father and one native Chinese father.

All participants were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon or LDS) which teaches that fathers should place their highest priority on their work as husbands and fathers (Hawkins, Dollahite, & Rhoades, 1993). A unique aspect of fathering for Latter-day Saint fathers is that, since the Church has a lay priesthood, most are also Elders in the Church. Church teachings and practices are designed to strengthen families and the most important Mormon religious obligations, covenants, and involvements are family-centered. In practical terms, this means Latter-day Saint fathers are strongly encouraged and motivated to lead their families in home-based family devotional activities (e.g., daily prayer and scripture study and weekly religious family gatherings called "home evenings") and to serve as spiritual leaders in their families including, when needed, to perform "priesthood blessings" for their children. Priesthood blessings involves the father laying his hands on his child's head and pronouncing a blessing of "healing" or one of "comfort and counsel."

Design, Procedures & Analyses

There is a growing body of literature in the social and behavioral sciences on the narrative approach to understanding people (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Brotherson & Dollahite, 1997; Kotre, 1984; McAdams, 1985; Palus, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993). For example, Palus (1993) found that lasting transformative experiences in adulthood are narrative in nature and are incorporated into the "life story" of the person, and McAdams (1985) found that identity is formed and changed in a "life story." Narrative accounts partake of the unique advantages of qualitative research that Miles & Huberman (1994), mention: natural setting, local groundedness, richness and holism of data, flexibility, emphasis on meaning, and usefulness for hypothesis development and testing.

The research method was qualitative, employing fathers' narratives gathered through in-depth interviews of one-and-a-half to two hours in length. Interviews were conducted by two-person teams, usually a man and a woman. Questions were designed to elicit from fathers narratives which illustrated times when they felt closest to (and most distant from) their children, times when they felt they met (and didn't meet) their children's needs, their most (and least) enjoyable experiences with children, and ways they tried to develop a good relationship with them. Narrative accounts are stories that describe events and typically give personal interpretation of those events (Brotherson & Dollahite, 1997; Dollahite, Hawkins, & Brotherson, 1996).

The questions asked were intended to draw personal experiences along with personal meanings of those experiences. Our purpose in conducting this study was to better understand some of the specific ways religious beliefs and practices help fathers facing the challenge of raising a special needs child. There were no questions which asked specifically about religious beliefs, practices, and experiences. Although some questions asked about negative experiences with their children, the interviews we had access to did not explicitly ask fathers about possible negative effects of religion on their fathering, although questions did not foreclose this issue.

The analyses were descriptive and interpretive, seeking to describe and interpret the meaning in the fathers' experiences and the fathers' own interpretations of their experiences. Other analyses of these data for other studies had indicated that, without having been asked specifically about religious matters, these fathers often spoke about the value and meaning of their religious beliefs, practices, and communities in helping them father a special needs child. Atheoretical coding of the interview transcripts (approximately 450 pages of dialogue) was conducted. The approach was to attempt to understand in what ways these fathers referred to religious beliefs and practices in discussing their experience as a father of a special needs child.

Reflexivity. Qualitative researchers typically believe it is important to discuss their reflexivity, or their understanding of the potential impact of their personal contexts and worldview on their analyses and interpretations, particularly if they are "insiders" in relation to the group they are studying (Daly, 1992; Farnsworth, 1996). Reflexivity acknowledges that qualitative researchers act from a subjective, interpretive position in the research process (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Riessman, 1993). Each of the authors is a devout member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and is understanding, appreciative, and supportive of the LDS perspective on fathering. All three are fathers and the first author has a child with special needs. We acknowledge that we are predisposed to see the positive value of religious beliefs and practices (and of LDS beliefs and practices in particular) on fathering. Furthermore, like many other qualitative scholars (and particularly "insider" scholars), we desire to convey the values, meanings, and experiences of members of that group to the broader community of scholars, rather than to take a traditional object-subject stance in relation to our respondents.

Results

This section presents fathers' narratives arranged into the six themes which emerged from atheoretical coding of the narratives. The first three themes mentioned are not inherently religious while the three latter themes clearly are. Given the overall religious nature of the interviews and of the ways Latter-day Saints tend to make

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everyday things sacred, we also place some religious interpretations from the first three themes in footnotes for the interested reader. Although the themes vary in their explicit focus, all give insight into what faithful fathering involves.

The Six Themes Found in the Narratives

1. choosing to care
2. dealing with today's challenges
3. building love through play
4. having faith in God's purposes
5. giving priesthood blessings
6. accepting help from the church

1. Choosing to Care

Fathers of special-needs children are often challenged to overcome the initial shock and heartbreak of a "less-than-perfect" baby, followed by unexpected demands, complications, and challenges that crowd into all areas of personal and family life. The stress literature demonstrates that a sense of personal efficacy or empowerment in challenging circumstances is very important in whether a person successfully copes with stresses and crises (Dollahite, 1991).

The fathers we interviewed faced disappointments, limitations, frustrations, and griefs that tried their patience and sometimes seemed to limit their options. However, a belief in their ability to choose both their attitude and actions seemed to be empowering by preventing a sense of victimization through emphasizing choices instead of constraints. This father has learned of the power he possesses to control his emotions and expresses the joy he feels when he chooses to do so:

> **Interviewer**: "Can you tell us about an experience when you felt especially close emotionally to Kristine?"[4]
>
> **Father**: ". . . it would be one of those times when I feel that I'm getting frustrated at something she is doing, or she is waking us up at night . . . but decide not to. You feel a bit more love in those instances when you decide not to get mad."
>
> **Interviewer**: "Can you tell us about a time when you felt especially distant emotionally from Kristine?"
>
> **Father**: "The times that I didn't decide to not get frustrated. Not making that decision [to stay calm]."

Despite the difficult situations fathers are presented with, if they do what they feel is best, in spite of challenging circumstances, they feel responsive to moral calls from their children. The next two narratives exemplify such "calls" from children and their fathers' responses.

> "One of my sons the other day, Russell, said, 'Dad, you never play catch with me.' That's when you know that you're spending too much time at work. If parents would only listen they've got warning signals out there in their kids."
>
> "I drove a truck for a while and I think that has contributed to our being distant. She felt like she didn't have a daddy. I came home and told her to clean something up and she said, 'You can't tell me what to do. You're not my daddy.'

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[4]All names were changed, unless participants specifically requested otherwise. (Megan's father requested that we use her name.)

That ripped me apart . . . I stopped driving a truck really fast and brought myself back home [more]. She was more or less saying, 'You should be home.'"

The following example shows a father who chooses to care for his young daughter who is dying from leukemia. He chooses to care for her continually and chooses to view a potentially distasteful chore as a meaningful relational experience.

"I've just about spent my life caring for and nurturing Megan, when I wasn't at work. Maybe the hospital is the part we like to forget but can't. When her pain got to the point that she couldn't go to the bathroom, I was the one that got to do her bedpans for her. She would only let me do it; I was the one that did that. It wasn't a thing for Mom, and she didn't want anybody else in the room. She kicked everybody out of the room; nurses, Mom (Mom had to be outside the door), and I would get the bedpan as best as I could under her bottom without hurting her. Moving the sheets hurt her. It was not a good thing. But she let me do that for her, and I was able to take care of her needs, and it helped me that I was the only one she'd let do it . . . You wouldn't expect bedpan shuffling to be a wonderful memory, but it was. She trusted me to do my best job not to hurt her, and that was special to me that she let me do that."

Thus, faithful fathering partly involves exercising power of choice to commit to be an enduring presence in a child's life and to care for a child even when that care is difficult and one is discouraged.[5]

2. Dealing with Today's Challenges

The research on special needs families has found that dealing with life "one day at a time" is an almost universal way of coping. Many of our fathers sounded similar chords when asked about their approach to the challenge of raising a special needs child. Frustration and overwhelming strain can accompany the effort to meet all of life's challenges at once. The following narratives illustrate the important and difficult work of dealing with today's challenges.

". . . immediately after Jerran's birth in the hospital . . . [the medical staff] were talking about his sexuality, about getting married, and all kinds of things that you don't even worry about with a normal kid, let alone a handicapped kid, when they are born. We were trying to decide whether to get him circumcised or not and the things that they were talking about in the hospital had nothing to do with us dealing with today."

"For the longest time, life has been a series of let's-try-to-get-through-today experiences."

"I think that the most important thing and the biggest change that McKay has made in our life is that he's made us realize that there are no guarantees in life and that we can't see till tomorrow. Something could happen to my other kids at

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[5]The importance of choice or agency is also taught in both the Bible (e.g., Joshua 24:14) and the Book of Mormon (e.g., 2 Nephi 2:27). Latter-day Saint religious belief includes the importance of using ones "moral agency" to do good for others in general, and one's family members in particular.

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> any time. I think that the thing we don't want to happen, and I don't want to happen, is that I don't want my last thought or my last experience with my children to be one that is negative. . . . We can't stop the arguments and we can't stop the fights . . . but the thing that we've tried to do the most is to be able to handle those as quickly as possible so that we can go on in a positive way from there."

This theme relates to fathers' involvement in generative, development work through daily responsiveness to a child's immediate and changing needs. Thus faithful fathering partly involves consistent effort in paying direct and immediate attention to meeting a child's daily needs.[6]

3. Building Love Through Play

One of the consistent findings of child development research is that fathers' play and recreation with children is associated with a variety of positive outcomes for children, fathers, and the father/child relationship. Recreation literally means "to create anew." Recreation recreates bodies, minds, spirits, and relationships and sometimes has a spiritual dimension, particularly with children that have physical, cognitive, or emotional limitations.

The fathers we interviewed described playing with their children as deeply meaningful experiences. Many, if not most responses to the open questions: "When do you feel closest to your child?" and "When do you think your child feels closest to you?" were similar to the response by this father:

> "When I'm playing with her and she [his special needs daughter] laughs."

The theme of play also was dominant when fathers discussed their "most enjoyable experiences" and "the most important things they do to meet their child's needs." One father conveyed his purpose in play as follows:

> "You can't very well pick a baby up and say, 'I love you. You know what that means? OK, good!' Letting him know he [his special needs son] is loved is the most important [thing]. The whole idea behind playing with him . . . is that it develops love."

One father explained how play helped his relationship with his special-needs son:

> "I try and play basketball with him . . . . He talks and opens up a lot more when we are playing basketball or doing things."

O'Keefe (1994) explains that although play can serve as a pillar of joy, "the joy is centered not on the activity but on the joy of being together." This joy of being together is apparent in father-special needs child play of many varieties.[7]

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[6]Taking life one day at a time is not only a type of folk wisdom, but is also found in Christian teachings. In Matthew 6:34, Jesus counseled, "Take no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

[7]Heintzman, Van Andel, and Visker, (1994) have made the somewhat counter intuitive case that leisure and play are important to Christianity. Consistent with this, Latter-day Saint faith and practice emphasizes the value of play to the extent that LDS

"[The most enjoyable experience I've had has been] changing his (special needs son's) diaper, because you can get in his face and be fairly close to him, and he's actually started talking or babbling for me. On the changing table I can usually get him to start babbling right back at me."

"One of the most enjoyable experiences that I remember is that we would play hide-and-go-seek. He (his special needs son) couldn't talk and he couldn't walk but he could crawl. I would hide and say, 'Okay, Brandon, come and find me!' and he would come and find me. When he'd find me he would laugh and we had a really fun time doing that. I think about that a lot."

A primary reason for the power of play between a father and his child may be that it allows the father to commune on the child's level. A father's responsibilities as teacher, provider, disciplinarian, etc., employ him on a different level than his child. In play, however, they can be buddies, teammates, equals.[8] The generative practice of "recreation work" can bring not only occasional fun or relaxation, but also deep and abiding joy to those facing significant challenges. Faithful fathering thus partly involves joyful, playful activity and conversation with one's child.

4. Having Faith in God's Purposes

Fathering a child with special needs can be a series of challenges and trials that leave those involved forever changed. For some this work is a perpetual torment, "an affliction that continually unfolds" (Greenfield, 1972). Yet for others the trials and challenges which surround their special needs child generate something more. Life becomes more meaningful, more cherished. For many such fathers the initial "trials" are later recalled as blessings in embryo.

Most of the fathers we interviewed expressed an optimism and hope which is relatively absent in many earlier narrative-based publications (e.g. Greenfield, 1972; Hannam, 1975; Turnbull, 1985). Religious faith was a significant part of that hope. This is consistent with the findings of Bennett et al. (1995) who found that religious beliefs give parents a sense of meaning and hope.

Stress theory suggests that the way in which a situation is perceived and defined has a tremendous impact on whether or not the situation becomes a "crisis" or not (Dollahite, 1991). One of the potential benefits of religious belief is that it can bring coherence and meaning during difficult times. Faith in a divine purpose can give fathers parenting children with serious challenges a way to define the situation that brings meaning, comfort, and hope.

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fathers are encouraged to play with their children in various ways, the Church sponsors many recreational activities, and most LDS chapels have a basketball court and a stage for theatrical performances. The Proclamation on the Family by the First Presidency and Council of Twelve Apostles of the Church mentions that successful family life includes "wholesome recreational activities."

[8]In relation to this, Jesus said that his followers should "become as little children" (Matt. 18:3) and when fathers play with their children they are becoming like them as they bond with them.

One father discussed how his son has influenced many for good and how this gave meaning to him:

> ". . . McKay was brought into this world for a special purpose and that was to bring people together. . . I could probably tell you ten or fifteen different instances where just this little boy has added light and brought people together for a common cause. I think that is one of the biggest reasons he is here with us today."

Many of the fathers from our sample gave personal examples of how their religious beliefs about all people being children of God, the potential for family relationships to continue beyond the grave, and the reality of perfect bodily resurrection in the future for their child with special needs help them to find meaning and hope.

> "I think the most important thing that helps me [to be the kind of father that Wei Pan needs] is the realization that Wei Pan is not my property. He is not my son, per se, but is a son of God and a child of God. He is given to me so that I can raise him. That realization reminds me that I am responsible to Heavenly Father for him."

> "You read the Book of Mormon, you read the Bible, and you know that we are all children sent from heaven down to earth. Also, being able to participate in temple ordinances, you learn that families can be together forever. However, there is a condition that you have to hold together and be worthy together. That is the ultimate motivation."

> "The most important thing in the universe, really, is your family, because it's the only thing that goes on past this life, meaning the relationships we develop. [Referring to his daughter who died of leukemia] She knew about death. She knew about bodies and spirits. We had another talk with her the night before she died. When we knew it was coming we talked with her. She was prepared. . . . One of the deepest insights that I think I got through this whole experience is that as we sent her off into the next world I was so happy for her because she was going to go on and get a perfect body. That body will never hurt her again and betray her, never fail her. No broken bones, no shingles, no leukemia."

Another idea which emerged from the fathers' narratives was the peace and strength which their faith in God's divine purposes provided for them and their families during and after the birth of their children with special needs. The following are examples:

> "We do have a faith and we do have a belief in Christ. We believe in a hereafter and we believe in a resurrection. Because of that we don't center our lives in trying to ask why it isn't fair or why things have to happen. We know that in our own due time, or in Christ's time, that those things will all be answered."

> "We did our best to make sure that we got through it well. We weren't going to say, "Why me?" and that is something I spent very little time on . . . I still wondered from time to time why she had to go through this, but I didn't spend any time being mad at God that we were chosen to go through this. I decided

early on that we were going to tackle this with faith and determination, and we were going to make it. We were going to come out being in love with God and not hating him."

In generative fathering terms, religious beliefs form part of the core of meaning that fathers pass on to children through the counseling and comforting that fathers do as part of their spiritual work. The generative ethic is based on the concept that the human condition is inherently challenging and that generative, faithful fathering can meet the needs that are associated with these challenges. Trials, including those that accompany the special needs of a child have, when met with faith and determination, become blessings which fathers and families would not surrender. Faithful fathering thus partly involves drawing on ones' personal faith to give one the strength and hope to give one's child the lasting care and compassion they need.

5. Giving Priesthood Blessings

Fewell and Vadasy (1986) state that disproportionately high desertion rates by fathers of handicapped children have been reported. They believe that such rates will continue unless a significant father-child bond is developed early. Research on fathers and their children with special needs shows that a father who establishes a strong connection with his child and is actively involved with his child during infancy is far more likely to be meaningfully involved throughout the child's life (Parke, Power, Tinsley, & Hymel, 1980). Marciano (1991), in her review of the literature on religion and fatherhood, mentioned that the LDS faith is unique in that it is based on a lay priesthood, and fathers are generally priesthood holders who administer to their own families. The LDS priesthood practice of a father giving a name and a blessing is one way LDS fathers minister to their families and helps facilitate a meaningful bond between father and newborn.

When a baby is born to an LDS family, Church members and the child's extended family place great importance on the ceremony of the father giving the child a name and a blessing. Family members and friends travel to be present at the blessing (often from some distance). In front of the congregation during a Sunday service the father and other family members and friends who are Elders in the Church form a circle facing each other and support the newborn with their hands in their midst. The father then gives the infant a name and blesses the baby (with things such as health, spiritual gifts, and talents). The blessing is a rite by which the child is "introduced" to the church family in the local congregation, and by which the child's name is placed on church records (following the blessing). The blessing also makes public and symbolizes the covenant that the father has made to provide for, protect, teach, love, and serve the child.[9]

In these next narratives, two fathers each explain how the experience of giving their child a name and a blessing helped them to bond with their newborns.

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[9]Although this LDS practice is unique in some ways, the practice of the father naming and/or blessing his child has parallels in broader Christianity (Christening, Dedication of infants), in Judaism (circumcision), in Islam (the Shiite bestowal of the sacred name), and in other traditions and cultures. These sacred practices are meaningful partly because of the father-child bond they foster.

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Interviewer: "Can you tell us about a time when you felt especially emotionally close to Luke?"

Father: ". . . the day I blessed him, when he was really little . . . . I think I was more jazzed than Teresa [his wife] . . . . I remember just how neat it was. There was my son. I was pretty emotional. I don't think he was but I was really emotional over that."

Interviewer: "Can you tell me about a time when you felt especially close to Trina?"

Father: "That would be when I blessed her as a baby. That's one of those times that I felt extremely close to Trina . . . I learned that I would die for this person. I learned that from this moment on we will be linked forever. This child is my responsibility forever, to guide, to direct, and to nurture."

To these and other fathers who were interviewed, the experience of giving their child a name and a blessing was transcendent and a formal commencement of paternal devotion. This practice is one way these fathers did ethical work by being there from the beginning and publicly committing to be involved continually.

Other than the naming and blessing of infants, there are other blessings that fathers give including blessings of healing (when someone is ill or has had an accident) and blessings of comfort and counsel (when someone is discouraged or needs guidance). This next narrative is from a father whose child was sick:

"Last night I stayed up till about 4:00 a.m. because Wei Pan was having a high fever, etc. When a kid gets sick you really reach out to them, and I asked him whether he would like me to give him a blessing and he said, "Yes." That was at about 3:30 in the morning. I went downstairs and prayed to my Heavenly Father that my sins would be forgiven, so that the Spirit would be able to bless my son through me, and the blessing would be able to reach him through me and I would be clean enough to do that. Then I came up to give him a blessing. Of course, that makes you feel very close to your children because that's exactly what fathers are meant to be, the patriarchs of the family so that you are there when your children need you."

The following poignant narrative is told by a father who had plead with God in prayer and through priesthood blessings to sustain the life of his daughter during the years she was struggling against Leukemia. He and others had given Megan numerous priesthood blessings and offered numerous prayers to try to heal her during her long and painful ordeal. After all these pleadings for God to spare her life, when their daughter had been in great pain for some time, he and his wife felt inspired to "release" Megan from what they believed were life-sustaining influence of the previous blessings. This was their way of letting God know that they were ready to accept that God's will may be to allow her to die and be released from all her pain. In Latter-day Saint practice, a blessing to release other blessings is an extremely rare event and is only done in extremely unusual situations and likely only under the influence of inspiration from the Holy Spirit, which Latter-day Saints believe can give a person guidance from the Lord.

"[Megan had] been in a lot of pain from this infection, and they'd given her a painkiller and it didn't always work. It would work for a while and then it wouldn't. That morning we'd been wrestling with the doctors and nurses trying to get her

more painkiller, and nothing was happening, and she was just crying for me to give her some sort of relief. I was helpless. What could I do? Sandra said, "Release her from her blessings," and I thought, "You know, that's the only thing that I can do for her." So I laid my hands on her head and I released her from all the blessings that she'd been given, and it was an hour later that she died. Up till that point there was no clue she was so close to death. I really feel that releasing her from her blessings did something, because although she had been plugging along and slowly losing the battle, it really surprised me that she could go from okay to gone in a mere hour. One of the most tender moments I may have ever had was holding her after she was finally gone. She had been in such pain that we hadn't been able to hug or hold her for a week and a half. She was so sensitive that if you sat down on the bed next to her it hurt just from the motion of the sheets against her skin. This infection was just spreading all through her tissues, making her red and swollen everywhere. But after she was gone, the nurse disconnected all the tubes and wires and I got to pick her up and hug her and hold her. I got to pick her up and hug her and hold her. It was very much like holding my Megan, as if she were only asleep. As a matter of fact, as I picked her up the shifting caused her diaphragm to move and a little sigh escaped her lips. I knew it wasn't Megan doing it, but it was Megan's sigh. It really sounded like Megan. That's kind of funny . . . but that may actually have been the closest I ever felt to Megan and she wasn't even there. She might have been in the room . . ."

These parents believed that if their daughter was released from all the previous blessings she had received, if it was God's will, she would soon die. It illustrates the profound love this father (and mother) have for their daughter since they were willing to let her go, rather than keep her on earth any longer under such persistent agony. It is also is a manifestation of their religious belief that they could be with her again in the next life so they were not saying goodbye forever.[10]

6. Accepting Help from the Church

Stress theory and research suggests that crises, such as the birth of a special needs child, can be more easily met if one has abundant resources to meet the demands of the situation (Dollahite, 1991). Religious communities can provide significant resources for parents trying to be generative (Dollahite, Slife, & Hawkins, 1998) and can be a multi-dimensional strength for parents of a special needs child (Bennett, et al., 1995). Latter-day Saint belief strongly emphasizes the importance of self-reliance and helping others as part of one's religious responsibilities and LDS men are encouraged to give service and assistance to others in many tangible and intangible ways. Accepting help from others may be difficult for men who believe they should be

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[10]This story illustrates the challenge it sometimes is to respectfully present sacred or religious experiences in social science scholarship. For some, it is an example of a story that may be too personal or too sacred to tell. We were concerned about this issue and wanted to honor this father's trust by asking him if he felt this story was too sacred be included in this publication. He expressed that he wanted Megan's story to be told and he gave specific permission for us to use this story.

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self-reliant and not be a burden. Thus, being willing to accept help when needed can be a challenging but necessary part of fathering a child with special needs. A religious community can provide moral, spiritual, social, and tangible support (even when a father may be distanced from its direct personal influence). This next narrative is from a father who initially perceived his family was not accepted into his new religious community but later realized his perception may not have been accurate.

> "We were kind of the outcasts in [a very religious] neighborhood because I'm a truck driver and I didn't go to church, so I wasn't active [in a church]. We had a lot of people that sort of turned up their noses and ignored us, and hoped we'd go away, but we didn't and stayed around. It was surprising to see [after the birth of a special needs child] how many of them like us. It was more of a perceived wall that wasn't really there. We've had people slip . . . cash under the door, and we have no clue who it was. It's been really neat."

The father who relates this next account gratefully received help from unlikely "angels": teenage girls and boys.

> "[After the birth of a special needs son who remained in infant intensive care] We went to the hospital every night for ten weeks and we had a lot of help from the youth in the ward [congregation]. A different youth would come to our home every night and watch our kids for the two and half hours that we went to the hospital. I think it was very positive for the youth also. We had different youth nearly every time and I think they looked at it as a service. In fact, a lot of them that volunteered to come were the young men . . ."

This next father called upon his religious leader in the middle of the night to come and assist him in giving his wife a blessing while his wife was still pregnant with their child that they knew would be born with significant disabilities.

> "My wife went into the hospital after being transferred . . . but before she delivered McKay and she knew the condition of his body, she had the faith to ask me for a blessing. I called up our bishop at 2:00 in the morning and said, "Bishop, I need you down here" . . . He came over and we gave Alison the blessing, and at that time she was blessed that McKay would live and that things would work out . . . I felt impressed to say those things, but I think that more than that my wife was prepared to hear those things."

Generative fathering involves the realization that no father can meet the needs of all his children all of the time. In such times it is important that fathers actively accept assistance for the good of their children, themselves, their spouses, and even the good of those who are serving. Faithful fathering partly includes establishing and maintaining meaningful connections with a supportive community that so that one's child will have the many benefits that community provides.

Conclusions and Implications

In summary, these LDS fathers strived to help their children with special needs by drawing upon the hope and strength their faith gave them to choose to care for their child, to focus on dealing with daily challenges, to build love between them and their child through play, to overcome the anxieties and griefs they experienced through faith in God's purposes, to try to heal and comfort their child through priesthood blessings, and to be willing to accept help from their religious communities.

There are several conclusions and implications from this research. The fathers

from our sample seem to provide a clear contrast to the long prevalent image of special needs fathers as being beset by despair and likely to abandon their families presented in prior literature. This "deficit perspective" on fathers (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997) is by no means limited to special needs fathering. Our findings support Hornby's conclusion that much available research on men fathering special needs children is unrepresentative in this way.

Although the "conceptual ethic" of generative fathering (Dollahite, et al., 1997) has been presented as an ideal rather than a descriptive model, the men from this sample seem to father in a way which is consistent with the generative perspective. Probably the most important way this is true is the way the fathers' narratives focused on meeting the needs of their children rather than their own needs or issues. This is consistent with the definition of generative fathering which focuses on fathers working to meet their children's changing needs.

Religion was an important resource for these fathers. It influenced how they coped, the perspective they took, the way they experienced their fathering, and the way they "told their story." It must be remembered that we did not ask these fathers specifically about religious matters so anything they said was offered spontaneously. They reported how they drew upon religious beliefs, practices, and communities and their narratives suggested that they believed that they received significant assistance in their fathering and the influence of religion was very positive. Religion helped these fathers establish and maintain a deep and meaningful relationship with their children that helped them transcend the very real griefs and challenges of child disability or illness. These narrative accounts by fathers who have weathered these challenges are of those who have allowed the spiritual and moral calls from their children and their faiths to help them to "turn their hearts to their children" (Malachi 4:6). Generative fathering involves fathers turning their hearts, minds, hands, spirits, and lives to their children in ways that consistently and continually meet the child's needs.

Professionals who work with families of special needs children report that most parents say that while they would not have chosen to have a child with significant challenges, they would not trade that child for anything and say that deep meaning and connections have resulted from their experiences. And religious beliefs, practices, and communities can serve as one of the most meaningful resources in helping people transcend the normal questions, doubts, and fears that parents with special needs children often experience.

LDS theology and practice is unique in some ways but has many elements in common with other faiths. Nearly all the themes that emerged from our data have analogs in other Judeo-Christian perspectives. This suggests that there are likely similar types of benefits from any authentic religious tradition for fathers facing trying times. These may include a coherent set of meanings and explanations, religious practices that bring continuity, comfort, connection with God and others, and a community of believers to draw encouragement and assistance from. Yet there are likely also unique benefits from different religious perspectives as well. For these fathers, their belief in a literal bodily resurrection in which disabilities and diseases would be done away with and their belief in the potential for family relationships to last beyond death seemed particularly important to them. In addition, these fathers' belief in their ability to directly access divine power and inspiration through giving priesthood

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blessings provided them with a way to connect with and serve their child.

There is an important implication of our work for the growing "men's movement." This movement now includes a number of religious groups and has been successful in influencing broader religious institutions as well. Religious-oriented men's groups (e.g., Promise Keepers, St. Joseph Covenant Keepers, the Million Man March) are part of the larger "Men's Movement" sweeping the nation, but are unique in placing at the center of focus, mens' moral and religious obligations and commitments. An implication of this research is that many men find purpose, direction, moral guidance, support, and a chance to make a meaningful contribution to others through their religious communities. We believe that religious traditions and institutions can have significant lasting impact on encouraging men to be responsible, involved, caring, faithful, generative fathers (Dollahite et al., 1998) and that those who work with fathers should facilitate religious devotion and connection for the good of fathers and children.

This study suggested ways that religious belief and practice is related to fathering a special needs child for fathers in one faith. There is much need for future research on the influence of religion on fathering. That work should try to better specify the particular ways that various religious beliefs and practices are helpful or hurtful to fathers and should ideally include fathers from a variety of faiths. Studies should try to understand the influence of religious beliefs, practices, and communities in the lives of fathers who are dealing with a variety of challenging circumstances.

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